THAT IS THAT - OR IS IT?
Isaiah 53:1-3
Luke 2:1-7

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A picture on the front page of the Journal & Courier Thursday Evening caught the prevailing mood of this week - and this Sunday after Christmas. It showed a pile of trash waiting to be removed, and in the middle, at a garish angle, a forlorn and barren Christmas tree. The post-Christmas let-down is upon us. After all, we began to prepare sometime in September or October. In the middle of November, the tempo increased as store windows were decorated, gifts were laid away, parties planned. In December we went full-throttle. Schedules were full: everyone was hard at work: emotionally we were investing everything we have in anticipating Christmas. And suddenly, it's over. What took months to come - came and went sometime, last Tuesday. And I think we may be forgiven if we feel a little washed out, - or let down today. The phenomenum is evident around the Church. The weeks prior to Christmas are full and happy. Girl Scouts baking cookies in the kitchen, Christmas caroling, parties, people coming and going every day. But it's been deadly quiet this week.

Yet, deep down inside, I have the feeling that this-along with the Sunday after EAster - is one of the two most important days in the Church Year. We have celebrated a birth - Now What?

The late W. H. Auden captured the essence of the occasion near the end of his Christmas Oratario, "For the Time Being":

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree.
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have got broken - and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the misletow, must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school.
There are enough Leftovers to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.
Once again as in previous years we have seen
the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable

Possibility, once again we have sent him away,

Begging though to remain his disobedient servant..."

Well, the point of this ~~sermon~~ sermon is very simple - namely, that the baby whose birth we celebrated - was Jesus Christ. To borrow from Auden, the agenda for the Sunday after Christmas is to prevent this "seeing the actual Vision and failing to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility."

Long before the birth itself, the prophet warned that ~~God's chosen servant would not always be recognizable and acceptable~~ men would not always accept - or even recognize God's servant when he appeared.

"Who has believed what we have heard?" he wrote: and that might well be the question Christians need most to ask on the Sunday after.

The prophet knew that ~~men would not be willing to accept God on God's terms~~ the servant would not always be appealing - that the preconceptions of men would prevent them from recognizing the servant of the Lord.

→ "he grew up before him like a young plant,

and like a dry root out of dry ground;

he had no form or comeliness that

we should look at him.

and no beauty that we should desire him."

Suddenly we are removed from the pastoral simplicity of the manger to the sermon on the Mount. Suddenly we are forced to move beyond the ~~love of a mother for~~ the beauty of a mother's love for her child, ~~and~~ to ~~confront~~ the ambiguity of a man who always ended up loving the wrong kind of people.

And the prophet won't let it go at that. He throws a handful of ashes into the holiday glow of Christmas by raising the spectre of hatred and violence directed toward this special servant of the Lord - a spectre that begins suspiciously to look like a cross:

"He was despised and rejected....

a man of sorrows acquainted with grief:

And as one from whom men hide their faces

he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

→ Or take it from the New Testament. I wonder if St. Luke had any idea of the allegorical significance contained in his little vignette about their being no room in the inn? Now that's a precious and important part of the Christmas story. But let's remove the varnish for a moment. Let's take it out of plastic or ceramic or music: let's contemplate

for a moment a dirty barn, and a feeding trough used in haste for a crib. But let's go easy on the inn keeper.

He did what men have been doing ever since: what the prophet said they would do - what in fact, our whole culture is in the process of doing this morning. He had other things on his mind: making money, for instance, from this year-end bonanza of cash customers. We can't very well blame him for that: it was his bread and butter. And besides, a full-blown party was in process: the wine was flowing: laughter filled the air. Who wanted to fool around with Galilean peasants? the girl very pregnant - and unmarried someone said. Put very simply - there was no room. But, of course, the inn keeper didn't know who it was he was inviting to sleep in the barn: and even his ignornance points toward the road ahead. For men have never been very good at recognizing God at work in their midst. - a major part of what the prophet said

~~Now, we've remarticized that part of the story. We've celebrated the part about "no room"~~: Our culture has done its best to acknowledge that Christmas has to do with a birth. But integrity forces us, on this day particularly to ask the prophetic question: "Who has believed what we have heard?"

And, quietly to affirm, that the baby whose birth we remembered is Jesus the Christ. A letter to the editor last week lamented the fact that the Nativity scene no longer adorns the White House lawn. But that's not the problem. Our culture doesn't have any difficulty welcoming the baby: it's the man who gives us trouble. Someone recently observed that an American Christmas is a little like holding a birthday party and not inviting the honored guest.

Campaign to put Christ back in Xmas

cite N.Y. Times - a Paper Tiger on Bible

In any case, our culture has always seen itself as basically religious: Christian: but without taking Jesus Christ very seriously. We have no room for him.

lot's of ways to document

For example I would like to read to you an excerpt from Catch 22, one of the most popular novels about World War II. A chaplain to a bomber group in Italy is being put on the carpet by his Colonel.

"We were speaking about conducting religious services in the briefing room before each mission. Is there any reason why we can't?"

"No, sir," the chaplain mumbled.

"Then we'll begin with this afternoon's mission." The colonel's hostility softened

gradually as he applied himself to details.

"Now I want you to give a lot of thought to the kind of prayers we're going to say. I don't want anything heavy or sad. I'd like you to keep it light and happy, something that will send the boys out feeling pretty good. Do you know what I mean? I don't want any of this Kindgom of God or Valley of Death stuff. That's all too negative. What are you making such a sour face for?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the chaplain stammered. "I happened to be thinking of the Twenty-third Psalm just as you said that."

"How does that one go?"

"That's the one you were just referring to, sir. "The Lord is my shephered. I - '"

"That's the one I was just referring to. It's out. Haven't you got anything humorous that stays away from waters and valleys and God? I'd like to keep away from the subject of religion altogether if we can."

The chaplain was apologetic. "I'm sorry sir, but just about all the prayers I know are rather somber in tone and make at least some passing reference to God."

"Then let's get some new ones. The men already are doing enough ~~bitching~~ griping about the missions I send them on without rubbing it in with any sermons about God or death or Paradise. Why can't we take a more positive approach? Why can't we all pray for something good, like a tighter bomb pattern, for example? Couldn't we pray for a tighter bomb pattern?"

"Well, yes, sir, I suppose so," the chaplain answered hesitantly. "You shouldn't even need me if that's all you wanted to do . You could do that yourself."

"I know I could," the colonel responded tartly. "But what ~~xxxx~~ do you think you're here for?.. You job is to lead us in prayer, and from now on you're going to lead us in a prayer for a tighter bomb pattern before every mission. Is that clear? I think a tighter bomb pattern is something really worth praying for. It will be a feather in all our caps with General Peckem. General Peckem feels ~~that~~ it makes a much nicer aerial photograph when the bombs explode close together"...

Colonel Cathcart began tramping back and forth reflectively.

....."I suppose we'll have to keepyou waiting outside until the briefing is over, because all that information is classified. We can slip you in while Major Danby is

synchronizing the watches. I don't think there's anything secret about the right time. We'll allocate about a minute and a half for you in the schedule. Will a minute and a half be enough?"

"Yes, sir. If it doesn't include the time necessary to excuse the atheists from the room and admit the enlisted men."

Colonel Cathcart stopped in his tracks. "What atheists?" he bellowed defensively, his whole manner changing in a flash to one of virtuous and belligerent denial. "There are no atheists in my outfit! Atheism is against the law, isn't it?"

"No sir."

"It isn't?" The colonel was surprised. "Then it's un-American, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure, sir." answered the chaplain.

"Well, I am!" the colonel declared. "I'm not going to disrupt our religious services just to accommodate a buch of lousy atheists. They're getting no special privileges from me. They can stay right where they are and pray with the rest of us. ~~And what's all this about enlisted men? Just how do they get into act? They have their own chaplain, don't they? He can pray for them.~~"

~~The chaplain said, "No, I'm their chaplain too, sir."~~

The greatest challenge to the Gospel is that in this culture people feel religious. in a vague, ambiguous way that has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. There is, that is to say, no room for the specific claims - teachings - moral standards - that surround Christian faith. It's not a problem of atheism - and never has been. The late Bishop James Pike in his book "A Time for Christian Candor" points out that an authentic atheist is very rare: even an honest agnostic is hard to come by these day.s But the world is filled with the indifferent: those, in his words "whose diffidence is about like that of most people toward vegetarianism: it's nothing they've ever been involved in or particularly thought about."

That's the issue that comes rushing in ~~on the Sunday~~ after Christsmas. And it seems to me imperative to draw it as sharply as possible. Either the claim that the child was God incarnate is true or it is false. If it is true: if in fact this lovely story is the tale of God's love for man - it is the most astounding thing that has ever happened. If it is true that God has come among us, the world is a new and different place, full of hope and grace because of that coming. If it is true that the Child was Jesus Christ then his words what he did when he became a man ought to be terribly important;...

ought to instruct and judge everything we do. If it is true that God gave him to us - as light in the darkness, as the assurance of eternal life, then our lives ought to be given to following him in happy gratitude.

If it is not true then the whole thing - the Christmas story - the Church - the faith ought to be oppossed by men of good will as the cruelest hoax and most fantastic lie ever told.

There is no middle ground. He is our Lord - or he is a most pathetic joke.

So the trees will be discarded: the decorations put away in their card board boxes, the children got ready for school. That is that. Or is it?

We have seen the actual vision - we have entertained it as an agreeable possibility.

Let us not, this year, send him away claiming, lamely - no room. AMEN

Eternal and Almighty God, we are grateful for the good and lovely celebration of your son's birth. It has warmed our hearts. It has brought us closer to each other. Now - as we return to normality, give us faith to be disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN